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ABSTRACT

College teachers can act as intermediaries between a class and a body of knowledge by making three important contributions: structure, evaluation, and support. The teacher's task is to keep the student's initial drive and enthusiasm intact while thwarting the desire to be content with easy answers. Teachers need to encourage a critical outlook and introduce students to examples of excellence. Although lectures present results and leave students with a clearly defined conceptual universe, a greater sense of personal discovery is possible in a discussion. Therefore, the sequence--lecture, lab, discussion--forms a pedagogical continuum that best facilitates learning. In addition to facilitating structured discussions, teachers can facilitate learning by serving as models of qualities such as honesty, perseverance, self-discipline, and service to an ideal. Good teaching does make a difference by inducing students to demand more of themselves, leading them to new ways of solving problems, awakening unsuspected talents, and inspiring students to become caring, creative, and thoughtful. (LH)

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THE ART OF TEACHING

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THE ART OF TEACHING

College students learn in many ways; most are able to learn readily and happily even when left to themselves. With nothing but personal interest spurring them on, they may explore the novels of Jane Austen, collect fossils, or immerse themselves in local politics. Informal contacts in the college community, ranging from casual conversations over coffee to deep and lasting friendships, introduce them to ideas and values that may prove as important for their education as their formal course of study.

What, then, does the teacher offer to the process of learning that students cannot supply on their own? *As the intermediary between the class and a body of knowledge, the teacher makes three important contributions: structure, evaluation, and support.* Structure comes from the teacher's ability to anticipate the likely trouble spots ahead, and willingness to help students find and maintain a realistic pace until they have mastered (or at least reviewed) a coherent body of work. The insights that come from unsupervised reading and extracurricular activities, however intense, are often random experiences; they cannot duplicate the careful sequence and sustained growth of ideas fostered by a well-crafted course. The teacher also provides the critique and stimulation of dialogue. Students will be required not only to absorb the instructor's explanations but also to answer questions, to defend a position or react to criticism. Such probing often reveals fundamental gaps in knowledge or misconceptions that must be pointed out before they can be corrected. Finally, a teacher's interest and encouragement can play a crucial role in motivating students to reach beyond self-imposed limits. By participating in the give and take of a learning community, under the guidance of an experienced leader, students share in group resources that usefully supplement their own, and they must confront standards that can be ignored or evaded when studying alone.

The central task of college teaching, many say, is to attempt to transform how students observe and interpret the world. The teacher's aim is to help them assume an active and creative relationship with their daily environment by developing skills in perception, analysis, and expression. By the end of their college years students should be able to identify and define the specifics of a problem or topic, make judgments about their value and importance, and convey those judgments with sufficient clarity that others readily grasp what they mean.

All too often freshmen, as they adjust to the formal requirements of academic life and--as a natural consequence--lose their awe of its institutions, also lose the curiosity that brought them there as well. In addition, teachers often must try to awaken a curiosity that has remained dormant during secondary school; overcoming the effects of poor teaching at lower levels requires truly superior teaching in college. We want students to develop a tolerance for the complex and the ambiguous that few attain before they enter college. To acknowledge the validity of competing and even contradictory points of view, to accept the limited nature of what can be known with certainty, to resist the temptation to reduce the world to simplistic categories--all require a sophistication that must be acquired gradually. The teacher's difficult task is thus to keep the student's initial drive and enthusiasm intact while thwarting the desire to be content with easy answers.

The teacher also needs to awaken and encourage a critical outlook--skepticism toward unproven assertions, a discerning eye for tautologies and self-contradiction-- that will serve as a testing mechanism for ideas the student will encounter thereafter. During adult life, Descartes' methodical doubt will prove to be a fundamental asset. At the same time, such criticism implies--and requires--an alternative standard. It is up to the teacher to demonstrate that standard by introducing the student to examples of excellence--whether embodied in a sonnet, a code of laws, or a mathematical proof--and by examining their characteristics so that they become familiar to the class. Even if students themselves cannot achieve work on this level, knowledge of its existence will serve as a touchstone for judging the efforts of others later on.

Discussion groups following a lecturer's formal presentation represent one technique that can help students gain mastery of the art of analysis. The size and format of such sections permit more detailed explanation of lecture material by the discussion leader, and allow students to raise questions or objections more readily. *Lectures present results and leave the student with a clearly defined conceptual universe; discussions search for solutions and enlist students among the seekers.* Like the laboratory session or field trip, a discussion section can encourage criticism of the lecturer's assumptions and invite students to go beyond mere assimilation of lecture material to more independent exploration of it. A greater sense of personal discovery is possible in a discussion than in a lecture,

for the answers emerge as part of a cooperative enterprise, and are not simply stated ex cathedra. The section differs from the lab or field trip, however, in that its primary goal is to elicit and compare explanations rather than descriptions, to evaluate rather than to observe. For this reason the sequence-- lecture, lab, discussion--forms a pedagogical continuum, each of whose elements enhances the lessons conveyed by the others in an important and distinctive way.

Some small courses are taught through discussion alone. Here, too, the focus is on analysis. How can we prove something to be true? What sort of evidence should we find convincing, and what sort should arouse our suspicions? These questions are the most basic part of any class discussion. The delicate balance between rigor and tolerance--applying appropriate standards of proof while recognizing one's ignorance--can be learned in discussion perhaps better than anywhere else. There the teacher offers guidance on how to criticize and how to conduct criticism.

If these are the strengths of the discussion course, then what are its problems? As might be expected, discussions do least well what lectures do best. The greatest risk is a lack of structure. The meandering conversation, full of intriguing tangents and autobiographical asides, can easily stop going anywhere at all. Students used to the definite shape of lectures may become disenchanted with the formlessness of free-association talk fests--and rightly so. At first some may not appreciate even good discussions. It is up to the discussion leader to explain the rules of the game, to nudge a conversation back on track, to declare some remarks out of order, and generally to keep the peace. It is also incumbent on him or her to put fearful students at ease as well as to calm the overbold. Many undergraduates seek out discussion groups because they feel lost in large lecture courses and want a warm, supportive, friendly atmosphere in which to learn. Some are less able than others to risk censure and criticism from the group, and as a consequence may contribute little. Yet another problem frequently encountered in discussion groups is the inherently negative bias of the exchanges there. It is far easier to criticize than to construct, and any theory, no matter how promising, leaves room for some objection. If the lecture encourages statements of fact at the expense of criticism, discussions encourage criticism at the expense of positive conclusions. Unless the instructor is careful, the student may come to believe that no generalization can withstand scrutiny.

What of the informal exchanges between teachers and undergraduates in the library, on the way to class, or over coffee? A suggestion for further reading on a topic, a stated opinion, or even simple encouragement can mean a great deal to a student. The fact that another person takes the trouble seriously to engage the student's ideas helps that student do the same. Students look to the faculty, not simply for information and approval, but also to learn how certain values are embodied in daily life. Whether or not teachers feel comfortable in this role, they cannot escape being treated as models or exemplars. For students, who are maturing emotionally at the same time that they are embarking on a formal course of study, the message conveyed by a teacher's actions and attitudes may be more instructive than the actual course content. Good research and good teaching alike require moral as well as intellectual qualities: honesty, perseverance, self-discipline, and service to an ideal.

The ultimate authority whose judgment students should trust and whose counsel they should seek, however, lies within their own intellects. This is why rote learning fails to educate. It does not give the student tools suited for independent use.

When a professor of the old school was asked to give his educational philosophy after decades in the classroom, he is reported to have said that the matter was really quite simple. It was impossible to have any effect on students at all. "The bright ones will learn no matter who teaches them," he insisted. "The others never will." But the professor was wrong. *Good teaching does make a difference. It induces students to demand more of themselves, leads them to new ways of solving problems, and awakens unsuspected talents. It inspires them to become more caring, creative, and thoughtful.* Poor teaching, on the other hand, makes its own kind of difference: it stifles, deadens, and destroys whatever curiosity and enthusiasm students may bring to their studies. And the damage it does can be permanent.

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For further information, see Chapter 1, "Varieties of Teaching," in Gullette, Margaret, Ed., *The Art and Craft of Teaching*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard-Danforth Center for Teaching and Learning, 1982.

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